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HR in Manufacturing

Before making a leap to the manufacturing sector, consider the pace, communication and even the smells.

By Kathryn Tyler

Kristi Schmidlap, SPHR, laughs when she thinks back on it. "In college," she says, "I did internships in an office and a manufacturing facility, and I swore I'd never be in manufacturing.

"I had to eat my words."

Schmidlap took a manufacturing job out of college, and when the plant closed, she moved to the service sector—but found to her surprise that she didn't like it.

"It was so quiet it drove me bonkers," she says. "There was no action. I couldn't see my employees. I could talk to them [on the phone], but it wasn't the same. I missed the people."

So Schmidlap became the HR manager at Corrugated Services LP, a recycled paper manufacturer in Forney, Texas, with 300 employees. "Now, my employees are in and out of here non-stop. I like that closeness. I get a pulse on morale and build a rapport with them. I love talking to people and being where the action is," she says. ›

Adam Goldman also had to re-evaluate his assumptions about manufacturing work. "I had a stereotype about what manufacturing would be like—dusty, managers who weren't interested in HR. But I was surprised. I've had highly engaged workforces in clean environments," says Goldman, who has practiced HR in manufacturing environments for 15 years and currently serves as HR manager at the vitamin and nutritional products manufacturing division of Alticor Inc., a consumer products company headquartered in Ada, Mich. The company's nonunion plants employ 650 workers in Buena Park, Calif.

Just as manufacturing positions brought surprises to Schmidlap and Goldman, they may surprise others who carry preconceived notions about this sector—and the biggest revelation may be that experts recommend a stint in manufacturing as a good career development opportunity.

"The person who gets her hands around the manufacturing processes will ultimately be an effective HR person," says Jackie Brova, vice president of HR at Church & Dwight Co. Inc., a consumer packaging and manufacturing company headquartered in Princeton, N.J., and best known for its Arm & Hammer baking soda. Brova says HR professionals with manufacturing experience "have a better grasp of the business.

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When you're making a policy change, they understand what the implications will be on staffing. Manufacturing people tend to be a little more business-savvy."

If you're considering a switch to manufacturing, prepare—like others—to be surprised by what you find. Practicing HR in a manufacturing plant is drastically different than in an office, so before you make a leap, take a look at some of the biggest differences—and most prominent issues—you'll be facing.

Unions, Contracts and Rules

Unlike office environments, many manufacturing facilities are unionized, which means HR professionals must become experts on union contract issues, such as negotiation and compliance.

Some say that union contracts can be both a blessing and a hindrance to the practice of HR.

Jeff Schroer, owner and president of HRScience, an HR consultancy in Columbus, Ind., with 25 years of HR experience in automotive supply manufacturing, has worked in both union and nonunion facilities. He says nonunion facilities are much more demanding for HR. "The union contract does a lot of the HR management for you," he says. "There's a grievance procedure. But in a nonunion facility, it's hard to get people to respect the handbook. There isn't a self-policing feature. It's a lot trickier and requires a lot more energy working in a nonunion facility. You can't fall back on a contract."

For instance, in a nonunion facility, workers tend to argue when you enforce absenteeism rules. However, in a union facility, when employees break absenteeism rules, the union steward won't fight on their behalf—which tends to take the fight out of the rule-breakers.

But Schroer also adds that nonunion facilities are "better in many ways. In a union facility, by definition, you have an adversarial relationship. In a nonunion facility, you don't."

Schmidlap agrees. When you have a discipline problem in a nonunion shop, you can speak to the employee directly, she points out; in a union atmosphere, you need to have a union steward present.

Whether or not the company is unionized, HR professionals in manufacturing need to be knowledgeable about employment laws and particularly strict about enforcing company policies, which generally are more important in manufacturing environments.

"HR in manufacturing is much more rules-driven and consistent in applying those rules," echoes Dawn Kubiak, SPHR, HR manager at Midwest Products & Engineering Inc., a custom sheet metal fabricator of medical devices and electronics with 180 workers in Milwaukee. For example, Kubiak notes that "at my former computer services company, the [absenteeism] policy was much more informal, and managers had the flexibility of determining what was considered excessive for their department."

Concerns About Safety

The emphasis on rules stems, in part, from the need for standardization as it relates to safety, says Anthony J. Tasca, founder and chairman of Louis Allen Worldwide Inc., a consulting company headquartered in Foster City, Calif.

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"Safety is a huge deal," says Schmidlap. "In an office, someone might trip over a file cabinet. Here, people can get pulled into the machines and lose arms or legs. People can get killed."

HR professionals in manufacturing must therefore take safety very seriously. "We have an extensive safety program," says Kathie Tilton, HR manager for the Foam-Tite division of the Amesbury Group, a window manufacturer in Amesbury, Mass. The Foam-Tite division employs 82 workers on three shifts, and Tilton looks out for all of them. "I want someone to go home the same way he came to work," she says.

The types of safety practices used can vary according to the type of manufacturing. For instance, food manufacturers are subject to regulations that don't apply to other manufacturers. "When we're in the food production facilities, we can't have long fingernails, nail polish or jewelry, and we have to wear hair nets," says Christine Southard, HR coordinator at Olmarc Packaging Co., a contract food packager near Chicago.

As a result, HR professionals in manufacturing spend a great deal of their time training employees on safety procedures, investigating accidents and demonstrating good safety practices themselves. "You have to train employees on safety issues, how to properly run the equipment, personal protective equipment and the reason they have to wear it," says Mollie L. Hines, vice president of legal and HR at Oldcastle Glass Inc., a glass fabricator in Plano, Texas.

Line workers aren't the only ones who must be aware of safety. "You have to exemplify the rules with protective" gear, says Brova. "You have to be seen walking around, making eye contact with people." Schmidlap jokes, "I'm quite a sight in my business suit and skirt, with safety glasses, steel-toed shoes and earplugs."

Unique Communication Challenges

Getting out on the floor is important because communicating with manufacturing employees is a challenge for HR professionals. For starters, you can't just send a mass e-mail informing employees of the new retirement plan because most perform physical jobs and don't have desks or computers. They also may lack computer access or savvy, which can place greater demands on HR.

"Ninety percent of our workforce don't know how to use the Internet and don't have a computer at home," says Stan Brewer, SPHR, HR manager of a division of Sara Lee Food and Beverage in Tupelo, Miss. Because the company handles benefits enrollment exclusively online, he spends a great deal of time helping employees enroll in benefits. "In an office, you'd just tell them to go online," he says.

"Questions about insurance benefits or how to fill out simple forms come up quite often," chimes Kubiak. "In my former professional setting, I rarely interacted with employees about questions they could easily find the answers for themselves," she says.

What's more, a plant may run two or three shifts, so employees may be working at different times, 24 hours a day. "It takes a lot of focus and hours to communicate effectively in a 24/7 operation," says Dave Martone, who has 20 years of HR experience, much of it in manufacturing. "The primary mode of communication is face-to-face at shift relief. Talking points are given to supervisors to make sure all shifts hear the same message. Posting notices on bulletin boards still works or putting notices in with paychecks," says Martone, who is vice president of KnowledgeBank Inc., an HR management service outsourcing firm headquartered in McLean, Va.

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Kubiak knows firsthand the challenges of communicating with shift workers: "We operate three shifts, and communicating with all three can be a big issue. Our third shift feels like the forgotten child. Many times we rely on our supervisors to get the message out and let us know of any issues."

But for really important topics, says Kubiak, "we hold meetings throughout the shifts, which means coming in at 5:30 a.m. to see third shift before they leave for the day. I'm in for third shift a couple of times a month."

Communicating in a manufacturing environment can be further complicated by language barriers. "English is a second language for a majority of our workforce," says Goldman, who adds that Spanish is the native language for most of his employees.

Southard faces similar issues. "Almost all of our people are Hispanic. I'm not bilingual, but our benefits person, HR manager and labor representative are," she says. (For more information on communicating with a bilingual workforce, read "Clear Language" in the December 2005 issue of HR Magazine.)

And in a plant environment, verbal communication in any language can be difficult. "Unlike in an office, there are loud noises out on the floor that can be a barrier to communication," says Troy A. Frostad, HR manager at Independent Food Processors Inc., a fruit cannery headquartered in Yakima, Wash., that employs 1,000 workers at the height of its harvest season. "You're around equipment operating at 95 decibels, and you're wearing hearing protection. It's hard to communicate. You become good at reading lips."

In addition, most manufacturing employees have less education than their office counterparts, so HR professionals must tailor their messages accordingly. "In an office, most employees have had some college or have degrees. In a manufacturing environment, they probably have a high school education. This impacts how you deal with employees," says Brewer. ›

For instance, an HR professional talking to line workers about Family and Medical Leave Act eligibility may use less legal terminology than when speaking with executives.

Blue-Collar Employee Relations Issues

A less educated workforce means the employee relations issues HR professionals face in manufacturing are often more rudimentary. "The types of issues are: 'Somebody stole my lunch,' 'My car got keyed in the parking lot' or 'I'm missing something from the locker room,'" says Goldman. "The challenge for us is efficiently resolving those issues, while devoting time to value-added HR activities."

Front-line employees also may have more personal problems that interfere with their work. "Your manufacturing group may have a lot more issues in their own personal lives to deal with. They may have transportation issues. Lots of employees may opt to work night shift because they are sharing child care [responsibilities] with a spouse. You have to be sensitive to this," says Hines.

But it's important to be sensitive without becoming embroiled in employees' problems. "My biggest surprise when I joined manufacturing was not being aware of the life issues our production employees are dealing with and recognizing we can't be social workers," says Kubiak.

If You Can't Take The Heat ...

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Some of the most noticeable differences between working in an office and a manufacturing facility are the working conditions. HR professionals in manufacturing plants are exposed to a variety of noises, smells, temperatures, work hours and—depending on the processes—dirt.

For instance, in the meat packing plant, Brewer has to wear hearing protection, steel-toed boots, a hard hat and a smock. He also wears a coat year-round because the plant is kept at 36 degrees Fahrenheit.

Frostad says, "It is not uncommon to be by equipment that is very hot and then go back into the frozen warehouse where it is very cold within a three-minute walk. In an office, it's quiet, clean and roughly the same temperature."

Most manufacturing plants aren't air-conditioned, either, which means the temperature can soar to over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summertime. "There's steam, water and heat—130 degrees! It's dirty," says Schmidlap. "In August, there's so much steam it gets into the rafters and makes clouds. It starts dripping like it's raining. My hair looks like I jumped into a pool. My clothes stink."

The noise can get to some people, too. "You can wear hearing protection, but it's noisy. There are trucks and forklifts going in and out," says Hines.

Even in the HR offices, the noise can penetrate. "I'm in the offices, but we still hear quite a bit of the noise and get quite a bit of dust," says Kubiak.

Depending on the product, the manufacturing facility may have a lot of different smells, also. "There's the smell of fresh product [fruit] to decaying product. There's the smell of the cooking process. You smell bad when you get home. That's part of food processing," says Frostad.

Schmidlap adds, "The process of making recycled paper has a sulfur smell to it. And, of course, some of the recycled material is trash, and it smells."

A Key Steppingstone

Avoiding these conditions may be neither possible nor desirable.

"You spend a lot of time on the floor," says Brewer. "In an office environment, if there's a problem, employees come to you. In manufacturing, you go to them."

But being on the floor can pay dividends for HR professionals. "Having plant experience is critical," says Brova. "The closer you are to the folks who are delivering the service or making the product, it gives you a leg up on understanding the business." (For more information on the business of manufacturing, see "On the Line".)

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to break into manufacturing, says Martone. "Unless you have some manufacturing line management experience or HR manufacturing experience already, you likely won't be selected for such a job unless you can demonstrate how related your experience was," says Martone. He recommends taking refresher courses in labor law and employee relations to make yourself more desirable.

But such effort will pay off in terms of job satisfaction, according to those who work in the manufacturing sector.

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"To be honest, I'd be bored going back to an office environment. Manufacturing is more fast-paced. There's more people to talk to, more to be done, and so little resources to do it," says Brewer.

Summarizes Hines: "Manufacturing is what makes America run. If you want to go where the action is, HR in manufacturing" is the place to be.

Is HR in Manufacturing Right for You?

HR in manufacturing is best-suited to certain personalities and individuals with specific skills. To succeed, you need to be:

- * Outgoing and confident. "You can't be bashful and sit in your office," says Jackie Brova, vice president of HR at Church & Dwight Co. Inc. "You have to be confident in talking to people at all levels."
- * Able to solve problems and make decisions quickly. "Be prepared to pick up the pace," warns Stan Brewer, SPHR, HR manager of a 180-employee division of Sara Lee Food and Beverage. "Anytime there's an issue on the floor, it's more critical than any office situation I had to deal with. In an office, you can think about it for a day and deal with it tomorrow. With manufacturing, you've got to make a decision then."
- * Patient with constant interruptions. "When employees leave a line to come here, I drop everything to help them. They've only got so much time for lunch. You have to give them your full attention immediately," says Christine Southard, HR coordinator at Olmarc Packaging Co.

"In a plant, it's harder to schedule your day. You don't know if you're going to have equipment breakdowns, a serious accident or an issue you need to attend to. There are lots of people in and out of your office with their own needs," says Mollie L. Hines, vice president of legal and HR at Oldcastle Glass Inc. "In a corporate atmosphere, you're more isolated. Calls can go into voice mail if you want to work on a report."

* Good at multitasking. "Unless you work for a large enough company where they have different parts of HR, you're a GP [general practitioner] and you've got to multitask," says Troy A. Frostad, HR manager at Independent Food Processors Inc., a fruit cannery. "You've got to deal with wage increases, discipline and EAP [employee assistance program], all in the course of two hours."

* Able to handle high-pressure situations. "Manufacturing can be very stressful. When that big machine runs, it's making money, and when it's not, it isn't," says Frostad. Says Brewer: "In an office, if someone is absent, it's [no big deal]. If a person is absent on the production line, you have to find a man to staff that area. You can't bring in any temp, either. It requires a certain level of skill to run that machine."

* Able to speak Spanish. "In certain parts of the country, being bilingual is critical. The last two HR managers we hired were bilingual," says Brova. Hines agrees: "If we can't find a bilingual person, we might ask them to take a Spanish course."

* Experienced in a plant environment or willing to get experience. "The HR person is required to spend time in the plant. This is not a desk job," says Hines. Frostad advises, "If you're going to go into HR in manufacturing, it's important to learn what the company produces. If you go into a plant that makes widgets and you don't understand what widgets are and how they are produced, it's hard to anticipate the labor demands within that workforce. Ask questions and develop strong relationships with the management team." (For more information, see "On the Line")

—Kathryn Tyler

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On the Line

HR professionals often receive the advice to "understand the business." There's no better way to understand the business than to work in a manufacturing facility alongside your front-line employees.

"You have to get acquainted with the different components of the manufacturing process. You can't develop job descriptions if you don't know what your employees do," says Mollie L. Hines, vice president of legal and HR at Oldcastle Glass Inc.

Jackie Brova, vice president of HR at Church & Dwight Co. Inc., agrees. Brova started her HR career in the mining industry. "I was 300 feet under the surface of the earth, with steel-toed boots, a mine belt, hard hat with a light on it and a battery pack, walking stooped over with my hands behind my back. When I look back on it, it was the best thing that could have happened to me," she says.

She says it's important for HR professionals to know, "Who are the equipment manufacturers? Who are the vendors that come into the facility? They touch your workers. If you're considering new equipment, what will be the impact on the workers? When you know the nuts and bolts of a business, you have a richness in your language. You can talk with your co-workers and supervisors" in their own vernacular.

Kristi Schmidlap, SPHR, HR manager at Corrugated Services LP, a recycled paper manufacturer, sought her manufacturing experience on the job. "For a while, I worked every Friday on the floor with the guys. They had me making starch. They tried to teach me their jobs and help me get acclimated to the floor."

The experience helped her do her job and paid other dividends as well. "How can I hire and train them if I have no idea what they're doing?" she asks. "From a safety and hiring standpoint, it really helped me. They appreciated that I had a willingness to understand their positions and what they do."

The experience of working on the plant floor with employees will have repercussions long after you clock out. "When you work on the floor, it gives you empathy for the issues the worker faces. When you make bigger policy decisions, you consider what that means to the production line person and the front-line supervisor," says Brova.

—Kathryn Tyler

Kathryn Tyler is a Wixom, Mich.-based freelance writer and former HR generalist and trainer.

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